THE HOLE IN THE WALL

By Pratick Ghosh

Heath woke up in a cold sweat, curled tightly in the fetal position—the oddly comforting shape he always returned to in his sleep. His phone vibrated violently beside him, the alarm blaring. It had already snoozed three times. With great effort, he got up and looked around his apartment.

It had been about two months since he finally moved out of his parents' house after getting the new job, something he had anticipated doing for years. The apartment's previous owner had sold it to him for a pittance, as if he were eager to get rid of it. That was understandable, honestly. The bedroom windows all faced a nearby building's wall, making the room darker than usual. The interior was oddly cold and musty, with leaky pipes and clogs in the bathroom being commonplace. He, of course, knew all of this before he bought it, but he desperately needed a place to call his own, and this would have to suffice.

While moving out was every bit as liberating as he had hoped, it also came with numerous new responsibilities. No longer could he wake up in the morning knowing that breakfast was already on the table, and the bills and paperwork felt endless. Only after starting to live alone did he realize how easy it had been for him these past 25 years. With all of this came a lack of sleep. Back then, he could sleep for ten hours without a care in the world; now, he was lucky to manage five. Being perpetually drowsy had become a part of his life, and his habit of aimlessly scrolling through random useless stuff on his phone wasn't helping either. He made a mental note to fix his sleep schedule, already aware that he would likely fail again.

While making his morning coffee—something he did more out of habit than desire—he glanced at the clothes piled on the chair in the corner. He'd meant to wash them yesterday. Or was it the day before? It didn't matter, he thought. No one was coming over anyway. As he drank his coffee by his bedside, he looked at his old guitar gathering dust on top of the cupboard. He had all but forgotten how to play it, and for the umpteenth time, he asked himself why he had brought it along in the first place. Entering the bathroom, he saw his phone light up again. His manager had emailed him about his consecutive late arrivals to the office. He wasn't sure if he would care if they fired him at this point, he thought while sitting on the toilet, clearing away the notification.

The bathroom was unnaturally small and extremely dirty. The shower dripped water incessantly, a sound he had learned to live with after many a sleepless night. As he sat there scrolling on his phone, the overhead light flickered periodically. He'd meant to change the bulb for weeks, but it always seemed too much trouble,

and the light was getting the job done anyway. After enjoying the trickle of dopamine from his phone for about 20 minutes, he decided it was finally time to get up and leave for the office.

As he started to rise, though, the light flickered again, and a shiver ran down Heath's spine. Suddenly, he felt cold, much colder than usual. It was as if the air itself had thickened. A strange sense of unease washed over him, as if someone were standing very close behind him. He jerked his head back and looked behind, even though he knew there wasn't anything there. But then he saw it. Right above the water cistern was a small hole in the wall, round and unfamiliar. He was sure it hadn't been there yesterday, and he hadn't noticed it today when he entered the bathroom. He wondered how he could have missed seeing it all this time. Was the lack of sleep finally getting to him, making him see things that weren't there? He blinked twice and ran his finger over the hole, confirming that it was real. It felt cold and clammy. His skin prickled. "Maybe it's just mold", he muttered to himself. The unease still stuck with him. After showering, as he buttoned his shirt and ate his breakfast, the image of the hole still gnawed quietly at the edges of his mind. As he took the keys from the table and stepped outside, he paused in the hallway, tempted to go back and look again. He decided against it and closed the door to apartment number 8.

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The door creaked as Heath stepped inside, greeted by the same stale air and faint mildew he had grown used to. The office had been hectic, and his manager more annoying than usual. It had been weeks since he'd had a proper conversation with someone about anything other than work. He tossed his bag onto the clothes-laden chair, kicked off his shoes, and landed face-first on his bed.

It took him a few minutes to realise that he still had to cook dinner. Begrudgingly, he started getting up, but froze as he noticed something was off. The air inside was colder again, just like it had been this morning. Instinctively, he rubbed his palms together, trying to shake the feeling, but the chill felt deeper than the surface of his skin.

Without thinking, he ran to the bathroom and opened the door. The hole was still there—and it had gotten bigger. It was now the size of a large coin, and it gaped at him. Heath stared at it, his breath growing increasingly ragged. He stepped closer, slowly, like someone approaching a stray animal that might bite. It was pitch black, and he could swear the edges almost seemed to move. He grabbed his phone and turned on the flashlight, pointing it at the hole. The light didn't seem to penetrate far; it just vanished into the blackness, as if the hole was swallowing it. Out of nowhere, he felt the urge to get even closer. It seemed strangely inviting. Almost unconsciously, he leaned towards it. There was nothing at first, but then he heard a faint sound, like air moving or whispering. Or was it scratching?

Heath staggered back, heart racing. Was there something alive in there? A rat? Was it mold eating through the drywall? Whatever it was, it wasn't his imagination anymore. He turned off the flashlight and backed out of the bathroom, still looking at the hole. He thought about calling the landlord—then remembered: this was his apartment now. There was no landlord to call. The other flats were all unoccupied. He closed the door to the bathroom and stood in front of it for a while, his palms sweaty. "Get it together, man", he muttered, suddenly angry at himself for being scared of a hole in the wall. He let out a dry, shaky laugh. He slid a chair up against the bathroom door. Just in case. It took a long while for him to fall asleep that night.

The alarm jolted Heath awake the moment it started ringing the next morning. Last night had felt like the longest night of his life. He'd alternated between staring at the bathroom door and tossing and turning in bed. He wasn't sure when he fell asleep. He wasn't sure if he slept at all. Did the alarm really ring, or was it in his head? He didn't know. He knew for certain that he was hungry.

As he sat on the bed, absentmindedly munching on a multigrain bar, he remembered that he needed to stock up on drinking water. The tap water in this place was undrinkable—one of its many, many faults. He'd started to regret moving here. "I should have just stayed at home", he murmured. The words tasted bitter in his mouth.

His gaze drifted to the bathroom door. The chair was still propped against it. He didn't even want to go in there anymore. There was no office today, so he decided that he would use the public restroom down the street when he went out to get some water.

He finished the bar, swung his legs off the bed, and crossed to the exit door. As he tried to open the door, though, the handle wouldn't turn. Somehow, the door was locked—from the inside. He looked at the table. There were no keys on it. As his heart picked up its pace, he patted his pockets. No keys. Not in his jeans, not in his shirt pocket.

Heath spent the next hour rummaging through his entire apartment. Nothing. The spare keys were gone as well. He took deep breaths, trying to stay calm. Maybe he could call a locksmith? Or he could risk crawling out through one of the windows. Except the windows all faced a wall, and it was too high up anyway.

After yanking the doorknob multiple times, he picked up his phone to make the call, only to realise there was no signal. The internet did not work, and no calls were going through. His heart started hammering against his ribs at this point. His fingers shook so hard that he almost dropped the phone.

Then he turned toward the one place he had been ignoring this entire time. There was no way the keys were in there, and he was sure the hole was still there. But what other choice did he have at this point? With trembling hands, he removed the chair and swung the door open.

A putrid stench hit Heath's nose, similar to the smell of dead and rotting fish. The hole now had the diameter of his arm. His breath quickened as he saw its edges move rhythmically, like it was breathing somehow. A clear, viscous fluid was dribbling down from it steadily, pooling on the floor. Heath slapped himself in the face. Twice for good measure. He wasn't dreaming. He also knew that the keys were in there. He didn't know why he knew this, he just knew it the moment he laid his eyes upon the hole. He knew he had to put his hand into it.

"Deep breaths, Heath", he told himself as he inched towards the hole. That urge to get closer was back again, even though he would rather be anywhere else in the world at that moment. He could not believe he was thinking of doing what he was doing. Then again, he could not believe what he saw in front of him. Bracing himself, he finally put his hand inside. It was cold and moist, slippery from the clear fluid dripping out. He could feel strange lumps inside as his hand kept going. As his elbow went in, he felt the hole clamping down on his arm. Only when he was up to his shoulders did he feel a familiar metallic object next to his fingers. The keys. Slowly, he started taking out his hand. Even though it was slippery, it took considerable effort to get his arm back out. It was as if the hole was trying to swallow him whole.

His entire right arm was now drenched in the disgusting liquid, and so too were the keys. But Heath didn't care. He just wanted out of this place. He took a final look at the hole and bolted towards the door. As the keys turned and the door clicked open, a sense of relief washed over him. He decided that he was going to move back to his parents' place today. He didn't want to stay a second more in this place. He ran out the door and slammed it shut. As he leaned on it with his eyes closed, he breathed a few sighs of relief.

Then he opened his eyes and looked around. He was back in his apartment. The windows were gone. The hole had gotten bigger.

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Heath lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling. A dull itch gnawed at his jaw. He sat up and started absentmindedly scratching it, noticing the multiple violent red streaks all across his body where he had scratched himself bloody.

How long had it been? He had lost track of all time. His phone's battery had died a while ago.

He had lost count of how many times he had tried to escape. Every time he went through the front door, he ended up back inside. Things went missing, presumably swallowed by the hole. All that remained now were the bed and the table. He had starved to the point that it was nothing but a constant numbing ache in his stomach. At least there was still tap water to drink.

He thought of banging on the door and walls to call for help again, but knew there was no point. Nobody was coming for him. He stood up and walked through the front door again. The table was gone now. All that was left was his bed.

He stood there looking at his bed for what felt like a few seconds to several hours. Then he turned to the bathroom and looked inside.

The hole was big enough to fit an entire person now. It pulsated steadily, its insides undulating. The fluid it secreted had flooded the entire room and was showing no signs of stopping. The stench from it was all-consuming, but Heath had grown used to it by now.

Heath started walking towards it. It called to him, and he had nowhere left to go.

As he stood next to it, the hole visibly widened, as if inviting him in. He looked back at his room. Letting out a deep sigh, he looked forward and climbed into the pitch-black darkness.

As the hole started to close behind him, he curled up tightly into a fetal position. It was oddly comforting.